Japan's "Super Global" Push for Communicative English

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Abstract

This article is a survey of the current theory in the area of teaching speaking in TESOL. The underlying reasons for writing this article are: first, the renewed interest in communicative language teaching (CLT) in policy-making circles in Japan; second, concern for the preparation of Japanese English teachers to take on the ambitious project of introducing CLT curricula and; third, at the launch of this new journal (*The Kyoto JALT Review*), a call to all classroom teachers to take on the additional role of researcher and join the professional discussions in order to expand theoretical and methodological understanding by publishing classroom research. The latest proposals to reform English education in Japan will orient the system here in a much more progressive direction. If these changes are enacted with sufficient funding to support them, they will be very significant. This article suggests that JALT members have the expertise needed to help guide this shift in direction toward a communicative orientation, and encourages educators in the second language field to involve themselves professionally in the process of change that is likely to result.

Keywords

communicative language teaching (CLT), language education policy, classroom research, teacher-researcher, theory-practice gap

Introduction

Japan is now experiencing a renewed push for the increased use of English. This new interest in communicative meaning-based English presents English teachers in Japan with potentially rich opportunities for developing as professionals. My intention for this article is to discuss the possibility of expanding current theory on teaching speaking through classroom research. That is, I will provide an overview of theoretical trends associated with the "super global" push, whilst arguing for the need to have more classroom teachers contribute to TESOL theory by engaging in classroom research.

Is There Really a New Push for English Use in Japan?

I can immediately hear the sighs from many long-time Japan hands in response to this question. It is sensible to be skeptical about official pronouncements promoting changes in Japan's English education policies. Indeed, many of us have heard it all before. This time might be different, however. Recent trends suggest that a confluence of factors is building into a kind of political-linguistic critical mass that has the potential to produce significant movement.

For years, corporate Japan has made statements about the need to employ workers with better language skills and a more cosmopolitan outlook; however, Japan's corporate culture remains highly resistant to change. Japan has an aging and shrinking population so Japanese companies are hollowing out the domestic manufacturing base and moving production abroad. These moves are seen as a matter of corporate survival. Recently, major Japanese companies with global ambitions, such as Rakuten (with Uniqlo closely following), have gone so far as to institute policies requiring all staff to use English for all business communication ("Ready or not," 2012).

As domestic companies shift their attention outward toward their global customer base,

the influence of English is likely to grow in Japanese corporations. As a possible result, ambitious young Japanese might need to move abroad to secure top-level corporate posts. Related to all of this activity, a government panel on education reform has recommended that Japanese students should be tested on academic and communicative English skills by requiring students to take the TOEFL exam (Hongo, 2013). While this proposal has been met with much skepticism and insightful criticism, it could represent a wedge that opens the door to necessitate the reform of English teaching and testing at long last. For instance, the new government panel on education reform has targeted perhaps the biggest obstacle to significant change—the flaws in the university entrance examination system. It appears that there could finally be serious exploration into ways of making English entrance exams for undergraduates reflect communicative proficiency through essay questions and interviews.

The government panel on education reform is stressing the importance of improving English proficiency ("Enhanced English education," 2013). Related proposed reforms include teaching some junior high school English classes only in English, and calls for universities to hire more highly-qualified foreign faculty who can teach university courses in English. Kyoto University, one of the acknowledged top schools in the nation, intends to hire 100 foreign nationals over the next five years. The university plans to teach half of its undergraduate liberal arts courses in English (Nagata, 2013). This is a very ambitious goal since currently only about five percent of liberal arts courses at Kyoto University are taught as English-medium subjects. Related to this shift, the Japan Association of National Universities has set a goal for national universities to double the number of non-Japanese teachers and classes taught in English by the end of the decade (Nagata, 2013). The government panel on education reform's report urges the establishment of "super global universities". These schools would receive extra government

funding for hiring non-Japanese faculty and increasing the number of degrees students can obtain by studying courses offered in English (Kameda, 2013). If these proposals are adopted and backed by serious funding, they are bound to make an impact on the English education environment in Japan.

In 2009, I posed the question: "What does communicative use of language mean in English classes where nearly all instruction is done in Japanese?" (Stewart, 2009a, p. 10). This question was asked in reference to a review of Ministry of Education curriculum documents. The 2013 Course of Study for Japanese high schools surprised many people by advocating that in principle English classes should be taught through the medium of English (MEXT, 2009, p. 7). After around 20 years of advocating greater emphasis on communicative English proficiency in Japan's high schools with mixed results, MEXT continues pressing Japanese teachers of English to adopt a communicative approach.

As Tahara (2012) rightly pointed out, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an ambiguous approach, rather than a more clearly defined teaching method. This ambiguity encourages misunderstanding which can lead Japanese teachers of English to apply personal interpretations of CLT that often lean toward more traditional methods of language teaching. Clearly, this mismatch indicates the need that English teachers in Japan have for specific training and knowledge on ways to implement CLT that meet the needs of high school students. My position underlying the thesis of this article is that JALT members are excellent resources in this regard.

Theoretical Trends in the Practice of Teaching Speaking

The CLT conundrum is obviously linked with the education reforms now circulating in Japan.

The proposed reforms will require Japanese teachers to expand their theoretical and experiential knowledge base of CLT and the teaching of speaking. *The Kyoto JALT Review,* a new Japan-based journal in second language teaching, is being launched at an ideal time for teachers here to reconsider CLT. In order to make sense of what is going on now in TESOL classrooms we need some perspective on how current practice has evolved. It is impossible to cover all of this terrain, so I will focus on a few major highlights from the past 25 years that have significantly influenced the classroom practice of teaching speaking.

My starting point is the publication of Bernard Mohan's seminal work *Language and Content* (1986). Mohan's 'knowledge framework' gave much needed direction to teachers, particularly in Canada and the United States, who were faced with a sudden influx of speakers of other languages entering the educational mainstream. Marguerite Ann Snow and Donna Brinton note the importance of Mohan's volume on the second line of their influential book on content-based language instruction (Snow & Brinton, 1997, p. xi). Content-based language instruction (CBLI) took hold in North American schools and is commonly employed now to support ESOL students at all levels intent on entering mainstream classrooms. In Europe, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has spread and is gaining attention worldwide, including Japan (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). The implications of CBLI and CLIL for TESOL practice are: first, the shift of focus from language form to acquiring information; second, a concern with using 'authentic' materials and tasks; and third, the integration of skills. The task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach shares many commonalities with CBLI and the two approaches are often used in combination (van Lier, 1996, p. 205).

Kumaravadivelu (2006a) describes the significance of the shift from communicative language teaching to TBLT. However, serious criticisms of task-based and content-based

approaches have been made. For example, Swan (2005) and Richards and Rodgers (2001) cite the lack of research results backing the claim of pedagogical superiority espoused by many proponents of TBLT. Richards and Rodgers determined that the claim that TBLT is more effective than other approaches "remains in the domain of ideology, rather than fact" (p. 241). In addition, Swan questions the appropriateness of implementing CBLI and TBLT in contexts where students are in class for only one to three hours per week, that is, most ESOL situations worldwide. Still, the criticisms of theorists have not appeared to dampen classroom teachers' preference for using these approaches. In recognition of this fact, Richards and Rodgers predict: "we can expect to see CBI continue as one of the leading curricular approaches in language teaching" (p. 220). Rather than rejecting the teaching of grammar, as Swan claims, many practitioners who use CBLI and TBLT have integrated a focus on form that is informed by the content material: 'The content drives the language' (see Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, 1991). This approach to grammar instruction depends largely on the judgment of the classroom teacher. The teacher's analysis of texts and her knowledge of her students ultimately determine what grammar needs to be taught (see Ellis, 2006 for more on the teaching of grammar).

Closely related to these two approaches is English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Widdowson (2003) asserts that: "All uses of the language serve particular purposes" (p. 61). This broad perspective suggests that the picture of specified language use is not as neat or as narrowly focused as the designation ESP appears to imply. Belcher (2006) does an admirable job of describing the many permutations of ESP. But regardless of their area of specialization, instructors involved in ESP courses "are often needs assessors first and foremost, then designers and implementers of specialized curricula in response to identified needs" (Belcher, p. 135). There is a recognition today in the field that students should be invited into the needs assessment

process (Benesch, 2001; Johns, 1997) and that the dilemma of ESOL practitioners' levels of content-area knowledge could be resolved by accepting students as subject experts and engaging them more in ESP course design (Dudley-Evans, 1997). Many of these changes in practice have been inspired by critical pedagogy and critical theory (e.g., Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1994).

It is sometimes hard to appreciate the extent to which digital technology and computers have changed much of the world, and teaching is no exception. Pre- and post-Internet is certainly one way to mark the recent development in TESOL teaching practices. From CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) to corpus to blended learning and mobile learning (mLearning), the waves of technological advancement are influencing practice in varied ways. Digital cameras seem to be everywhere and are capable of recording extremely high-quality images and sound that can be sent around the world and posted very easily using Web 2.0 tools. Social networking is central to the lives of many students today and promotes the social constructivist philosophy of thinking and learning as situated social practices. But some things never change. No matter what tool is being used, practice remains the pivotal element: "[I]t is not the technology per se that is effective or ineffective but the particular ways in which the technology is used" (Kern, 2006, pp. 188-89). As always, practitioners are exploring the pedagogical potential of new technologies. Mobile devices, for instance, can be used collaboratively so that learners can co-construct knowledge as they engage in community building out of class (Mishan, 2013). So where are methods positioned in this new high-tech teaching practice?

Practice in the Post-methods World

Standardized testing drives a good deal of educational policy and with that trend growing since the year 2000 skeptics ask whether practice has been affected much by the post-method ideological world as pressures build to teach to high stakes tests. Since the 1980s the literature regarding methods of language teaching has shifted from the promotion of methods packaged for universal application, to a sort of reflective and individualized eclecticism (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006b; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The critique of methods in TESOL has partially centered on a limited, mechanistic role for teachers that reveals an inflexible behaviorist conception of learning. Since methods are conceptualized as being universally applicable, they ignore crucial contextual factors. This reality has dulled the appetite of scholars to search for TESOL's methodological holy grail.

Kumaravadivelu has been writing about the 'post-method condition' since the early 1990s. In his extensive critique he debunks five myths of methods (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, pp. 163-68). His fourth myth is: *Theorists conceive knowledge, and teachers consume knowledge*. Challenging this popular impression of the process of knowledge generation has inspired my recent research (Stewart, 2006, 2009b, 2013), including this paper.

The Teaching of Speaking

What does it mean to 'know' a language? Most of the time people mean being able to converse in that language. It seems safe to presume that for the majority of language learners today speaking is the most highly valued skill. But teaching a communicative class is not a simple undertaking, despite the view of some Japanese professors. Brown (2001, pp. 267-68) notes that: "The goals and the techniques for teaching conversation are extremely diverse, depending on the student, teacher, and overall context of the class." Learning to speak another language is a very

complex task that requires simultaneous attention to a range of sub skills. The 'fluency versus accuracy' debate continues, while longitudinal studies of immersion students have convinced many practitioners of the need for a greater focus on form (Swain, 1985). This has led to a redirecting of the practice of teaching speaking from an open engagement with meaningful tasks (indirect approach), to a direct approach that "explicitly calls students' attention to conversational rules, conventions, and strategies" (Brown, p. 276). As examples of this trend, task-based and content-based approaches to language teaching both seek to include the consciousness-raising elements promoted in the focus on form (e.g., Fotos, 2002).

Likewise, the practice of teaching speaking has been impacted by incorporating sociopragmatic skills into TESOL pedagogy. Hinkel (2006, p. 116), cites Kasper's (2001) findings from an extensive review of the literature on teaching pragmatics, stating: "… explicit teaching and direct explanations of the L2 form-function connections represent a highly productive means of helping learners improve their L2 sociopragmatic skills."

Finally, technological advances have allowed scholars to create huge corpora of spoken language (O'Keefe, McCarthy, & Carter, 2007) and these have opened up the way to reconsider written textbook language forms and traditional ideas of 'correct' usage in conversation through the recognition that languages are dynamic structures that change constantly. In light of this recent development, Hinkel (2006) posits: "… curricula that attend to the distinctions between conversational and formal oral production can prepare learners for real-life communication in EFL and ESL environments alike" (p. 117). This observation takes us back to the key issue of tasks and materials. Being able to design or select engaging materials and coordinate a series of high-quality tasks is probably the most important classroom management skill needed by teachers of speaking (see Folse, 2006).

Sharing Practitioner Knowledge

In the survey above, I presented some of the central theoretical and methodological issues today in the practice of teaching speaking in TESOL. I will conclude this paper by directly addressing the need for teachers to more actively co-construct teaching practice. Practitioners can and should contribute more to professional discussions in the TESOL field. In fact, the launch of this new journal represents a worthy initiative for that purpose. Classroom teachers need more forums where they can describe what they do and think more systematically about why they do it and how well it works.

The "artificial dichotomy between theory and practice" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 166) is a persistent theme in the contemporary literature (Allwright, 2005; Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Johnson, 2006; Stewart, 2006). Recently, however, TESOL has experienced a greater valuing of experiential practitioner knowledge. Thus, 'research' in the field has broadened to permit teacher-researchers to investigate their own practice through, for example, narrative studies, exploratory inquiry and action research (see Allwright, 2005; Holliday, 2004; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Shohamy, 2004). By exploring puzzling aspects of their own classroom practice, teacher-researchers reinterpret their practical knowledge through a dialogic interchange between the theoretical literature, their experiential knowledge, and ongoing classroom research activities. It is the dynamic interaction between teachers, students, texts and contexts that defines current practice in TESOL.

Second language classroom teachers typically choose this line of work because they enjoy teaching. Many language educators I know simply want to teach and not bother with other obligations. In addition, teachers regularly complain that much of the research published by

second language acquisition (SLA) researchers is not useful to them. That claim is made so often that it is impossible to ignore, or dismiss. This stubborn perception indicates that something is missing in the research that regularly gets published in the field. I believe that the missing element is classroom research done by regular classroom teachers. Teachers' research is something that can empower teachers as it contributes significantly to their professional development. More than this, by researching their practice teachers add valuable voices to the professional conversation that otherwise would not be heard by the larger community. Classroom teachers are the very community that "expert" researchers seek to influence, but currents of influence should become more egalitarian and run both ways if second language research is to be accepted more readily. This trust gap can be bridged by classroom teachers themselves by engaging in classroom research (Stewart, 2013).

Indeed the foreign language education field is changing. Higher levels of professionalism are expected today in foreign language teaching. More teaching positions now require advanced credentials including master's degrees, doctorates, as well as professional activity including publication. A veil of mystery shrouds professional publication for many classroom teachers. I have met many TESOL teachers who feel the need to publish articles, but lack confidence to move forward. The paradox is that teachers naturally research their teaching.

So what misconceptions and fears hold back regular classroom teachers from sharing their experiential knowledge with the wider field? First, many novice teacher researchers feel that they simply cannot do research because it is too difficult for them. In fact, research is a process that anyone can learn. Second, some academics still look down on qualitative research and classroom research because they think that it lacks validity and rigor. While research is certainly not impossibly difficult for teachers to do, it is more than simply reflecting on what you

did in your class today. Teachers have to go beyond the kinds of reflections characteristic of hallway chats with colleagues and investigate their practice in a disciplined, systematic and thorough way. Third, the image of research that most of us have resembles basic research done in laboratories under controlled conditions, using highly sensitive equipment. But the truth is that precision is often lacking in research, especially social science research. Research is a process of discovery. Fourth, those new to research are apt to think that they do not have any ideas that warrant the label "research". However, adopting the role of a teacher researcher normally proves to be transformational and suddenly plenty of ideas are likely to come to mind. Fifth, novices are likely to believe that nobody will be interested to hear about their experiences in classroom teaching. My response to this fear is to encourage novices to start local by engaging fellow teachers in their own school first. Perhaps, stage a small activity-sharing lunch or mini-conference. This is an excellent way to gain community support and build your confidence. Finally, novices can easily be fooled about the true nature of research when they read journals and reference books. The neat and tidy product in these publications is an illusion of perfection. The final written product of a research project conceals the doubt, false starts and frustrations that inevitably occur. Research is a messy, frustrating and exhilarating process of learning and professional development.

Perhaps research-phobia is ingrained because by default, even in English language teaching, teachers think of research as large-scale empirical studies. However, it is long past time to raise the profile of teachers' experiential knowledge in the research literature, and it is the duty of classroom teachers to do this. This is a worthwhile task well within the capabilities of teachers to accomplish. To take up the challenge of doing classroom research, classroom teachers need to make a shift in thinking from being a teacher to being a teacher-researcher. This

seemingly small shift in thinking requires a commitment to professional activity that goes beyond the core tasks of lesson preparation, teaching and grading. Teachers who take on such a commitment will enjoy the satisfaction of learning more about their own practice as they explore it in a systematic way. Through this practitioner-research, teachers can contribute to the larger methodological and theoretical discussions in the field.

Conclusion

No doubt skeptics will scoff at my contention that the ground is shifting toward more innovative and communicative pedagogy in English language education in Japan. To these critics, I respond that I have witnessed the start of this dramatic shift myself just recently. JACET is quite a conservative and traditional organization of Japanese English teachers, but that characterization might deserve reexamination. JACET just concluded its most successful conference ever at Kyoto University. The conference had the significant goal of bringing related fields together. The underlying motivation for this unprecedented open and collaborative exchange amongst specialists in different but related fields is the need to strengthen the voice of educators on policy issues related to education.

In this article, I have given several examples of the "super global" push MEXT is now promoting to improve communicative competence in English. Of course, mandates will not get the job done without the support of solid professional development seminars for teachers and ground-shifting changes to the university entrance examinations. Foreign teachers have been sidelined for the most part in the lengthy debate about English education in Japan, but the organizers of the 52nd JACET Convention made a point of reaching out to JALT, amongst other professional organizations, for ideas on ways forward. This is a good start toward taking down

the obstacles that have blocked teachers of English in Japan from collaborating more and learning together. I am convinced that this inclusive environment will flourish and that teachers interested in CLT in Japan will enjoy many opportunities for engaging in classroom research as a result. The 2020 Olympics in Tokyo will surely increase the momentum in the direction of such change.

Career advancement in academia often depends upon an individual's ability to publish. The changing landscape of English education in Japan is a major invitation to English teachers to make their voices heard by describing what they do in their classrooms and why. Japanese colleagues are starting to reach out to non-Japanese teachers in order to share ideas for improving English education in Japan and this will open up many possibilities for collaboration. Becoming a professional educator requires all of us to educate one another, for the benefit of our students and the advancement of our field.

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